SMILE!

A MAHIRU KOIZUMI ZINE

smile!

A Mahiru Koizumi Zine

Hello and welcome to Smile! A Mahiru Koizumi Zine.

Mahiru is a precious character, she's strong willed and determined, and she means a lot to us, so it's been a joy to work with so many fantastic creators to put together this zine - we have over 40 contributors who've all helped make this project come to life!

We really hope that you enjoy the zine as much as we all enjoyed making it!

Happy Birthday Mahiru!

24/04/2022

Third Time's The Charm!

by Sunny, illustrated by KlibOuma

Homework was rarely assigned by Usami, who just so happened to be responsible for about sixteen talented high schoolers. She was a bundle of magical girl-like sweetness, and all in the form of a pastel pink-and-white rabbit, too. She felt that, while academic homework *was* important for the young mind, socialization and friendships held just a *bit* more prioritization. She valued the genuine, heart-warming joy that came from a strong bond; a friendship with a worth that was bigger than diamonds and gold. And she wanted that for all of her students; she wanted all of them to bond and get along, even if those resulted in out-of-the-ordinary interactions and outcomes.

So whenever she *did* assign some kind of homework, it wasn't exactly difficult. It could be completed in one sitting; it didn't take much time or effort to do it. However, there was a catch to it all. Said catch was that it was usually more personal; it was assigned face-to-face and one-on-one for a reason. The homework pertained *solely* to the student she was assigning it to. It wasn't mentally damaging by any means, but it was definitely different from the normal homework assignment that involved using the quadratic formula for a set amount of problems, or reminding students that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. So while on paper, the 'homework' was relatively simple, considering how unique it was, the lucky student ended up making it harder than what it actually was.

Mahiru Koizumi's case was no different than anyone else's. She was in the midst of going through some of her most recent photos, with her looking back at all of them on her signature camera. The 'homework' assignment came out of nowhere, with Usami showing up out of nowhere and causing the girl to jump back in surprise.

"Gah, Ms. Usami! D-Did you *really* have to scare me like that?" Mahiru said, clutching her camera to her chest.

"Uwah, I'm super duper sorry about that, Mahiru! I wasn't trying to scare you. Besides, Halloween has already come and gone, a-and I don't like all the scary creepy-crawlies that come along with it. That includes scaring my precious students!" Usami said, shivering in fear at just the thought of Halloween (and all of the 'creepy-crawlies', which actually meant tiny spiders and horror cliches being referenced left and right). "I'm here to assign you some homework!"

"Some... 'homework'? We haven't been doing anything previously, other than talk about how important friends and family are."

"That's because friends and family are genuinely super duper important! Having a friendship is like putting whip cream on a strawberry parfait: it's amazing! But strawberry parfaits aren't a part of your homework assignment. I'm assigning you something new; something that'll require you to come out of your bubble a little."

"Okay...? So what do I have to do, Ms. Usami?"

"Your homework assignment..." Usami grabbed Mahiru's camera, holding it up as she brightly smiled. "Is to take at least one selfie with another student in this classroom!"

“W-Wait, what?! Why a selfie? Can’t I just take a regular picture of someone and call it a day?”

“This homework assignment is *strictly* asking for a selfie. A-Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to come off as super mean! But as much as this hurts to say, the answer is no. I want you to take a selfie with someone here. I know how you feel about selfies, so I wanna do my very best to help you feel a bit more comfortable!”

“W-Well,” Mahiru scrambled to find a way out of doing her ‘homework’. “Selfies aren’t as good as regular pictures of other people. They’re more natural and less… embarrassing.”

“That’s not true! Selfies are just as nice, because they still hold just as many warm and fuzzy memories as any other photo. Plus, I want you to work a bit on your self-esteem because you’re amazing! Anyone would love to take a selfie with you, Mahiru. So please, with tons of pink sprinkles on top, will you do your very best to take a selfie or two with someone?”

Mahiru softly sighed, switching her attention between her camera and the persistent rabbit. As much as she didn’t want to do this, she knew there was no way of getting out of this. When Usami was determined, she was determined and then some. There wasn’t a single mean bone in her body either, so all of her persistence was legit and straight from the heart. It almost felt like telling a well-behaved kid no. She couldn’t find it in her to say no and reject the assignment, so with a reluctant nod, she said: “Okay, okay, I’ll do it. I’ll take a selfie with someone.”

“Yay! That’s the spirit! I know you’ll do super duper great! With that in mind, I’d like for you to take a selfie with,” Usami twirled around a few times before pointing her stubby hand towards a particular student. “Nagito Komaeda!”

“Wait a minute, why him? I didn’t know I’d be assigned a person, too!”

“Tee-hee, that's because I sort of decided to assign you someone last minute. I'm sorry about that! Moving on, he could use a thoughtful, honest friend like you! I only ever see him hanging out with Hajime and Chiaki, and while it warms my heart to see him talking with *some* people, I want him to make more amazing friends! He could use another lunch buddy; it makes me sad whenever he eats alone. Will you at least try? Pretty please?”

This time, Mahiru held back a second sigh. She didn’t hate Nagito, but his well-known self-loathing and passion for hope and Ultimates was a bit off-putting to her (although it was relatively off-putting to everyone else, including Usami). He was currently talking to Chiaki, so at least she wouldn’t feel too awkward or out-of-place. Tapping on her camera out of habit, she thought about it some before replying to her teacher’s question.

“Fine, I’ll try.”

“Yaayy! From the tip of my bunny ears to the bottom of my stubby feet, thank you bunches and bunches! I believe in you, Mahiru. Just do your very best, and you’ll pass with lots of ease!”

"Right, right."

Usami happily bounced off to go check on another student, her optimistic energy basically contagious. Standing up from her desk, Mahiru grabbed her

camera and took a deep breath. She wasn't exactly shy or socially anxious, but this was a new experience for her that she didn't particularly like or dislike. She knew it was something that she should just get done and over with though, so with her head held up high, she walked over to Nagito and Chiaki, ready to complete her 'homework assignment'.

"Um, excuse me?" Mahiru spoke up, grabbing the attention of her peers.

"Oh? Do my eyes deceive me? Is the Ultimate Photographer really talking to trash like me? I can't believe this. I'm so honored that you'd take time out of your day to confront me. I'm so happy to see you here." Nagito rambled, smiling.

"Hey there, Mahiru," Chiaki greeted, briefly glancing up from their Nintendo Switch. "How are you?"

"I'm doing good. How are you two doing?"

"I'm okay. I'm filling up the Pokédex in the Sinnoh region. For a remake, the chibi art style doesn't personally fit with the atmosphere and stuff. But my nostalgia for it makes it a decent payoff. It's an even score, meaning it's a tie and everyone gets four coins each."

"I'm doing fantastic now that I'm talking to you, Mahiru! Ah, please don't take that the wrong way. It's just a surprise that you'd actually want to talk to garbage like me."

"Well, I'm... glad to hear that both of you are doing okay, heh," Mahiru said, letting out a sheepish chuckle. She suddenly felt awkward standing there; she was starting to second guess if completing this 'homework assignment' was actually a good idea. "Anyway, I'm not here to chit chat and waste time. I came here because of something that Ms. Usami assigned me to do, and you two are involved."

"We are?" Chiaki tilted their head in confusion, pausing their game. "You need a Player Two and a Player Three for your homework?"

"I suppose you can say that. I was assigned to take a selfie with at least one other classmate, but I guess there's nothing wrong with a little extra credit. With that in mind, do I have your guys' permission to take a selfie?"

"You most certainly do! I would be beyond honored to take a selfie with not just one, but *two* wonderful Ultimates!" Nagito excitedly exclaimed.

"If I had dialogue options, then I'd pick the one that says something like, 'You have my permission, dear friend'... I think." Chiaki said.

"Alright, let's all huddle close and take this selfie quickly then," Mahiru pressed a few buttons on her camera before turning the lens towards all three of them, stretching her arm out and holding out the camera. Considering the height differences between all three of them, she made sure to angle it to where they would all be visible (but also while making sure not to strain her wrist). Once she was satisfied with the angle, she positioned her pointer finger above the shutter button. "Okay, say cheese!"

"Cheese!"

Mahiru pressed the shutter button, and once the picture had been taken, she turned the camera around to see how the picture turned out. As a photographer, she always expects the first picture to not look the greatest, but this selfie wasn't even close to being decent. All of them were barely visible; it looked as though the lighting had been amplified to the max to the point where

it was extremely blinding. On top of that, whatever she *could* visibly see appeared to be blurry. Nagito and Chiaki leaned in close to look at the picture themselves, with each one giving their own reactions.

"It looks like we pulled out the Bonus Stars that we earned. That's what I like to think." Chiaki said.

"Looks like my bad luck got in the way. Please forgive me, Mahiru." Nagito said.

"I can't say for sure if it was your bad luck or not, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is the lighting. It's terrible! You can't see a single thing. Maybe I accidentally pressed something before taking the selfie?" Mahiru held the camera as she made a few adjustments, double-checking to make sure everything was to her liking. Once she was sure the settings were right, she turned the camera back around and resumed to her original angle. "Okay, let's try this again. Say cheese!"

"Cheese!"

Mahiru pressed the shutter button again, turning the camera around and taking a look. This time, the lighting was normal, but it proved to be pointless anyway when she noticed that Chiaki wasn't even looking at the camera. They had somehow fallen asleep standing up, and while that wasn't too big of a surprise, it still bothered Mahiru. Holding her camera in one hand, she used the other hand to gently shake Chiaki awake, her expression a mix of genuine concern and slight irritation.

"Chiaki, wake up!" Mahiru said.

"... Ah, sorry. I was getting a little sleep." Chiaki drowsily mumbled out, rubbing their eyes and wiping the small amount of drool off of their chin.

"It's... It's fine. Just try to stay awake for a little while longer, okay? Let's try this one more time and hope it turns out well this time," Mahiru angled the camera for the third (and hopefully last) time, his pointer finger eager to get this done and over with. "You probably know what to say by now. Say cheese."

"Cheese!"

"Cheesy puffs!"

Just as Mahiru had taken the selfie, Usami had bounced right into the frame, photo-bombing her students. Taking a closer look at the selfie, with the exception of her own teacher photo-bombing it, everything else looked picture perfect. The lighting was great, there wasn't any blurriness, and all three (well, all *four*) were visibly in the frame. Chiaki's video game console could be seen, but so could her faint smile; Nagito's grin was a bit *too* eager for her personal liking, but she could tell it was genuine; Usami was pumping her stubby hand in the air with the biggest smile on her face; and Mahiru was showing off a peace sign as she bashfully smiled. She couldn't help but smile with pride, but her expression quickly turned to annoyance when she turned around and looked at Usami.

"Ms. Usami, why did you do that?" Mahiru asked, hands on her hips.

"*Uwah*, I'm super duper sorry! I didn't mean to rudely jump in without asking. I just couldn't help myself; you three looked like you were having so much fun! On the bright side though, you aced your homework assignment with a solid A plus. Congratulations, Mahiru!" Usami cheered, joyfully twirling around

a few times. "Class will be over in just a few minutes, so I'll let you three start packing your things. All of you have a super duper lovely day, and make sure to have fun this weekend, too!"

"We will, Ms. Usami." Mahiru said.

"You take good care of yourself, sensai, okay?" Nagito said.

"I'll make sure to catch tons of Pokémon thanks to you motivating me, Usami!" Chiaki said.

Once Usami bounced towards her front desk, the three departed to their desks to start packing up. Neatly putting her notebook and pencil case away, just as Mahiru had put her camera away and zipped up her crimson red bookbag, she was confronted by both Nagito and Chiaki.

"Hey guys. Do you need something?" Mahiru said, standing up and slinging her bookbag over her shoulders.

"Not exactly. Before we all walked to our own homes, me and Chiaki wanted to see if you'd be willing to give us copies of our selfie. Of course, an Ultimate like yourself probably has a busy schedule, so feel free to take your time with this. Or heck, feel free to say no. I just ask that you at least give Chiaki a copy." Nagito said.

"You and Chiaki actually want a copy?"

"We do. It's a nice memory that we want to cherish for as long as possible. I mean, people usually like to cherish good stuff by taking and having photos, right?" Chiaki questioned.

"Right! Okay, I can make that happen. I'll bring you two copies of the selfie Monday morning. Does that work with you guys?"

"It doesn't cost too many social points, so it works for me."

"My mornings are always free, so it works for me, too."

"Great!"

The school bell rang throughout the building, releasing everyone for the weekend. With Usami happily bidding her students goodbye and giving each one a candy bar, Mahiru soon met up with her friends from a different class and walked home with them. Once she returned home, she was determined to immediately get to work on making copies of the selfie.

And she knew for a fact that the first copy would be just for her.

GREAT!

OU CAN

IT!

Camera
CAMERA EF LENS
Mark II

Snapshot

by Irisowari, illustrated by Mae

It wasn't out of the ordinary for Mahiru to receive a call in her office with inquiries about photoshoots. Though, it wasn't every day it was someone she went to high school with.

She kept in touch with her friends after graduating high school, but none of them went to her business as they never had a reason to schedule a photoshoot. Mahiru didn't mind that—she knew her friends would support it in a heartbeat if they could. They still rooted for her when she went to college and received a bachelor's degree in photography, and even went to the celebration ceremony for the opening of her photography company.

The phone on her desk rang as she was getting ready to go to the studio to start setting up for her next appointment. Before the phone was about to go to voicemail, she picked it up and held it to her ear.

Mahiru cleared her throat before she spoke. "Hello! This is Mahiru, how can I help you?"

"Hey, hi, hello! Ibuki was wondering if you had an appointment slot open for a photoshoot this weekend?" a familiar voice asked.

When Mahiru heard Ibuki's cheery voice, she couldn't contain her surprise. "O-Oh! You're in luck! I have a slot open for one-thirty on Sunday. Do you want to do this outside, or is there a specific place you want the photoshoot done?"

"Just at your studio is fine!" Ibuki answered. "Ibuki is trying to take some photos for her new album cover, so she'd prefer it to be done inside!"

Mahiru's jaw dropped. "Wow, you're releasing your first album soon?"

Ibuki laughed. "Yeah! Time's flown by."

They continued their discussion over the phone. Mahiru asked about specific ideas Ibuki had and what she'd like for props, the background, and the setup.

"Ooh! Ibuki thinks pink would look nice," she exclaimed. "Oh! Let's not forget confetti, this *needs* confetti. Ibuki will also bring her pink guitar. And do you have balloons? This might call for balloons."

She rambled about other ideas she had while Mahiru quickly scribbled on a piece of paper, trying her best to keep up with her friend's talking speed.

Ibuki took a deep breath. "Does that give you enough to work with?"

Mahiru glanced at her notebook pages, turning them to see how much she wrote. "Yes, you went into plenty of detail."

"Sweet!" Ibuki shouted. "Ibuki can't wait, thank you!"

Mahiru smiled even though Ibuki couldn't see it. "Of course! I'll see you at one-thirty on Sunday."

"See ya!"

Ibuki hung up the call and Mahiru skimmed over her written pages, still in shock. She never would've expected one of her past classmates to schedule a photoshoot with her.

Nonetheless, Mahiru was still grateful and excited for the day of Ibuki's photoshoot to come.

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Sunday came a lot faster than Mahiru would've thought, and she had worked for almost two hours setting up the photoshoot.

She was almost done when Ibuki walked into the studio twenty minutes before her photoshoot was supposed to start with her guitar in hand, which confused Mahiru.

"Hey... I'm still preparing everything, I hope that's okay," Mahiru told Ibuki, who had a huge grin over her face.

"That's no problem! Ibuki got here early on purpose," Ibuki replied. "She wouldn't want to show up late and mess up your schedule."

Mahiru laughed. "I appreciate that. I'll be ready for you in a few minutes. Just hang tight! You can sit on the chair right there."

She pointed to it, and Ibuki took a seat and played a game on her phone while Mahiru finished setting up the camera and adjusting the lighting.

"And I'm done!" Mahiru said with a grin on her face. "Since I got this done early, we can get started now. I'll have someone come in to help with some of the "

Ibuki jumped up from the chair. "Hooray! Ibuki can't wait!"

Mahiru led Ibuki to the camera setup and Ibuki walked over to where the background and props were set up.

"You did a great job on this!" Ibuki commented, her hands reaching for all of the props she asked for. She adjusted the microphone that was on its stand so it was closer to her height.

"Thank you! I've worked on it since my lunch break ended," Mahiru responded. "I think this was the most fun I've had while setting one of these up."

Ibuki put her guitar strap behind her neck and held the instrument as she would if she were playing it. "Thank you for working so hard on this. Ibuki appreciates it!"

Mahiru shrugged. "It's nothing to worry about, it's just what I do. Let me know when you're ready and I can adjust the light one more time and get the confetti and balloons going. I have plenty of them so we can do multiple takes."

Ibuki nodded. "Ibuki will pose! She'll let you know when she's ready."

She put her head down to look at the guitar in her hands and acted as if she was strumming on it. "Ibuki's ready when you are!"

Mahiru adjusted the lighting to be darker and had her assistant grab balloons for the picture. She held the button in her hand for the confetti and counted down. Once she counted to one, her assistant released the balloons and she

released confetti and snapped a picture. She quickly looked at how it turned out.

“Alright, looking good,” Mahiru muttered to herself. “Once you get that confetti out of your hair, we can take a second one!”

Ibuki moved her hand to brush out the strands of confetti before returning to her pose. “Ibuki’s ready!”

Mahiru repeated the process, and she was able to snap another shot. After she assisted Ibuki with the confetti in her hair, they took one more, and she reviewed all of the results.

“I like how all of them turned out!” Mahiru stated, going through them over again. “What about you, Ibuki?”

Ibuki looked at the three and gasped. “Mahiru! Ibuki loves all of these! You’re the best, thank you!”

Mahiru smiled. “It’s no problem, I was happy to help out.”

Ibuki looked through the takes once more. “Ibuki will come again for her next album cover! She loves your work.”

Ever since that photoshoot, Mahiru had looked forward to Ibuki’s next album release.

VIDEO PHOTO SQUARE

pretty eyes
shot.1
windy444
shot.2
Surprise!!

Twilight Syndrome
Murder Case
Press
START

ersatz

by Soul

If there's one thing that can be said about Mahiru Koizumi, it's that she spends her life pretending.

She pretends her life has been happy, pretends that when she smiles in pictures, it's genuine, and pretends that she knows what she's doing. It's how she's gotten this far – other than her general knack for photography, she thinks that half of her success has come from her headstrong nature and the confidence everyone thinks she has. So she pretends that both of her parents are in the crowd when she graduates from Hope's Peak Academy, pretends that something doesn't feel somehow *wrong* within her graduating class, and pretends that her decision to travel the world and do photography is motivated entirely by her love for what she does.

And when the contract slides across the table, she signs it and pretends her hands do not shake as she slides it back. From across the table, Novoselic's head of royal communications beams beside the royal family. "It will be a pleasure to have you aboard, Miss Koizumi."

She twists her lips into a poor imitation of a smile, only finding comfort in the warm look that the Queen is still giving her from her place beside the head of communications. Her blonde hair is pulled into a bun, accentuating her sky blue eyes and sharp features. She's enchantingly beautiful in a way that makes Mahiru's fingers itch to grab her camera. But she doesn't, only spouting words that are equally sweet as they load her up with folders. The photographer receives folder after folder; covering topics such as Novoselic's history, what's

required of her, their plans and visions – everything is delicately crafted, made to give her just enough freedom to explore but not enough to make them look bad.

A gilded cage, she thinks. It's mutually beneficial, but confusing. On the surface, the offer is vain at best and misleading at worst – she *is* being tasked to push a narrative, after all. But there's something in the Queen's eyes as she looks upon Mahiru, something that reminds her of the smiles in her mother's pictures. So if that spurs her to take the money and forget about the bars of her cage, then it isn't the worst thing someone from her graduating class has done. (And the money will be nice, a quieter part of her murmurs, it will keep her where she wants to be.)

Besides, it's in the agreement that no one is to know where they're at or what they're doing. The man across from her had said it was for something like security, which made enough sense. What still doesn't make sense, however, is the amused expression the Queen had donned.

So Mahiru ignores that in favor of doing what she's best at.

Pretending.

As the door to her hotel room opens with a quiet *beep* from the card reader, Mahiru sighs.

Another day, and she isn't any closer to figuring out what to do with the princess. She's been researching it for days now, but nothing's quite *right.* Nothing fits in the way she expects it to. Nothing gives her good photo opportunities. And, well, if she's being honest…. she doesn't have much experience to go off of. Most of her activities at school were things Ibuki or Sato had dragged her into, and even then, she wouldn't call those experiences typical. She'd had sleepovers with Sato, sure, but Ibuki's idea of a good night was a mosh pit, Hiyoko had fun kicking down sandcastles, and Mahiru's idea of a good night consisted of a walk around the city to look for photo opportunities with her friends.

But things are different now. Mahiru can't just find good photo opportunities; she has to find good *experiences*. And ensure she knows what she's doing because they're not getting security. According to the contract, no one will even know where they are for security reasons, which means Mahiru is responsible for the driving, the sights, and more.

It sounds like a teen movie when I think of it like that, she thinks with a huff.

The thought makes her nearly drop her bag as she stumbles over her own feet to get to the whiteboard in her room. It's a large whiteboard; one of her first purchases upon receiving her first payment from the royal family. (Realistically, it's the only big purchase she's made, which is a product of habit more than it is a product of her financial situation. They're responsible for having her hotel, meals, and excursions with the princess paid for; everything else is icing on top of the cake.) On it are scribbles and frantic brainstorming, but the ink is very dry. She hasn't come up with anything for days.

So she's delighted to uncap one of the markers and write the word "movies" under the brainstorming category in a bright, colorful font.

And if she adds a few more exclamation points than strictly necessary, or spends the rest of her night watching teen movies and taking notes, no one needs to know.

Novoselic is a beautiful country.

It strikes Mahiru as she drives through the city, tapping her fingers on the wheel of her rental car. The cities are not like hers back home, where the towering buildings can feel like insurmountable giants. They're tall, yes, but each of them has their own shape. Their own personality. Instead of the twists of metal and glass back home, Novoselic favors brick and wood looks with flowering vines and odd shapes. It's like stepping into a wonderland of sorts, and it's hard to not whip her head this way and that as she's driving down the street. Even still, she catches glimpses of happy people, of teens with shopping bags hanging off of their arms and sunlight dripping off of their faces.

And not for the first time, Mahiru's compelled to capture that on camera before she reminds herself that she will in just a few hours.

So her fingers go back to drumming on the steering wheel, and she turns her music up a bit louder until she arrives. When she does, she takes a look at herself in the rearview mirror. From here, all she can see are her own anxious green eyes and a hint of the freckles splattered over her nose, but it's enough. It's enough to remind her of her mother, the smiling pictures hung from fairy lights in her room, and the group text that her friends send memes to. It's enough to remind her of her mother's arms settling around her shoulders as she won her first photography contest and pressed a kiss to her hair.

It's enough to pretend that she has confidence in her plan.

So she walks to the palace gates with her shoulders squared and her chin high, returns the smile of the servant that goes to fetch the princess upon seeing her, and waits in the arching foyer. It's warm-looking, almost personal, but it's hard to discern if that's the work of the royal family or yet another carefully managed piece of the impression they want to give everyone.

"Ah, so you're Mahiru!"

Mahiru's eyes jump to her right side, where the princess is approaching from the side hall. The girl looks to be around her age, but that's the only thing similar about them. Where Mahiru's hair is short for practicality, Sonia's is long and blonde. It's kept back by a braided hairband that matches her hair eerily well and a bow, allowing her sharp features and grey eyes to shine in the sunlight filtering in through the windows. And her outfit is surprisingly innocent and casual; a green sweater dress with white buttons and a white peter pan collar. Even in a collared shirt and a skirt with her signature tie, Mahiru feels woefully underdressed to be meeting her.

She curtsies in what she hopes is a polite gesture. "Yes, your majesty, that would be me."

Mahiru isn't sure what reaction she expects to the curtsy, if she gets one at all, but it's certainly not a giggle. She straightens immediately after hearing it, apologies already mingling with the dryness on her lips as Sonia speaks again.

“There’s no need for such formality, Mahiru! After all, we’re friends starting today, right?”

Friends. It’s such an odd thing to say to someone you met moments prior, but the corners of Mahiru’s lips curl as she nods.

“Of course, your– Sonia. Friends.”

As it turns out, Sonia Nevermind is quite chatty. She’s very sweet, too, which makes Mahiru’s job a lot easier. In fact, as she stops at red lights, she’s able to snap pictures of Sonia gesturing with her hands to describe things as she stares ahead with sparkles in her eyes. It gives her more ideas that she eagerly files for later.

The trepidation of working with the princess fades as she spends more time with her on the drive to their destination – Mahiru’s actually increasingly sure that it would be harder *not* to get along with the princess than to get along with her. The hypothesis is confirmed as they step into Mahiru’s first stop of their day: Novoselic City’s cat cafe. It’s cozy inside, balancing the signature designs of the city. Wherever there’s wood, plants and brick follow, along with lots of glass.

For a moment, she only observes it, and then a gasp from Sonia draws her attention to her side. When she looks, she finds the galaxy reflected in the girl’s eyes as she looks at the cats and their scenery. The pure joy on her face is almost child-like, in its own way, but something that Mahiru can’t resist snapping a picture of. And as they find a table to sit at, one of the cats accompanies them.

It’s a little black cat; one that jumps on the table and peers at Sonia with wide green eyes. Mahiru delights in the way that her expression melts as she holds her palm out to the kitten, speaking to her companion without even looking up. “I believe the little one likes me,” she coos. “I only wish I could ask them their name.”

“You can look on their nametag,” Mahiru suggests, already taking more pictures. “That usually has the sex and name.”

Across from her, the cat purrs and nuzzles Sonia’s hand, who is so overjoyed that she looks as if she may cry. Hesitantly, she lifts her hand to their collar and reads the tag. Her gaze is even more fond as they flop onto their side and show her their well-groomed belly. “You are quite friendly, aren’t you Nuit?”

The cat lets out a rumbly purr in response, and Sonia gives it a few more moments of close attention before she looks up at Mahiru. Her eyes widen at the sight of the camera, and on impulse, Mahiru snaps another picture. When she sheepishly lowers it from her eye, Sonia has an eyebrow quirked at her.

“You’ve been taking pictures?”

“Well, I try to get as many shots as I can. And it’s very easy to get candid shots if–”

Sonia leans forward in the middle of her panicked ramble, careful to keep scratching the cat on the stomach. “Amazing! May I see them?”

“Yes, but, uhm, I will warn you that they haven’t been edited. Or ran by the PR department. Or–”

Sonia waves it away dismissively, causing the words to die in her throat. “I’m positive that they’ll be amazing.”

Mahiru nods, handing over the camera carefully and waiting anxiously. Sonia holds the camera tenderly, as if it's a crown, but her gaze is nearly analytical as she begins to flip through the pictures. It softens into amazement as she continues to go through them, but there's one that she stops at. The photographer watches as her eyes widen, flickering from the cat on the table, to Mahiru, to the picture again. After a minute of staring, she looks up at Mahiru with a smile.

"This is....wow. I see why Mother picked you," she says, handing the camera back.

As Mahiru looks down, she's pleasantly surprised to see that the picture Sonia has taken a shine to is the most recent of the pictures she's taken; the picture of her and Nuit. Other than the impossibly fond look on her face, the light in the picture enhances the sunshine dripping from her person. It conveys Sonia's delight without breathing even a syllable.

"Thank you," she nods, trying to fight a wide smile.

"I do mean that sincerely," the blonde adds, "you capture wonderful things. Not just beauty, but something more."

Mahiru's eyes rise to meet her own, quickly spotting the difference in her expression. In her eyes, the stars are still present, but they remind her less of their youth and more of the organized patterns of space. At that moment, she is not the Sonia that Mahiru has come to know thus far. She is someone different, someone borne and bred for something *more*, someone who is not letting their guard down but peeking through a hole in the wall.

And as she opens her lips to respond, Mahiru can only think that, maybe, she's not the only person in the room who's pretending sometimes.

A Gilded Past, A Brighter Future

by Ecchi_Skecchii, illustrated by Eli

“Where are we going exactly?” Mahiru asked again as Sato excitedly led her through the streets of Towa City, only a short train ride away from Hope’s Peak. The gleaming skyscrapers towered above them as they navigated through the throngs of people.

“You remember that new cafe that just opened up?” Sato asked, looking over the heads of people.

Mahiru nodded. “Yeah, it’s a little French bakery, right?”

“Yeah. I thought it would be a good way to finish off our girls' day out.” Sato led her past a throng of people admiring the robotic helper bears, a new addition to the streets of Towa City from Towa’s Robotics Division. Eventually, they stopped outside of a storefront painted muted pink with black doors and silver handles. A sign above the door read “Cafe Marseilles” in stylized katakana. Metal tables sat under striped umbrellas outside. “Here we are!”

“Wow, it looks pretty cool!” Mahiru exclaimed. Sato hurried to the door and opened it, gesturing for Mahiru to go in first. Mahiru entered the building and was immediately hit with a wonderful aroma; a mix of ground coffee and cinnamon from whatever was baking in the oven. The inside of the cafe looked warm, with muted yellow paint and marble tables. There were a set of tables

on the right side, while a bar where customers could pick a pastry to take with them or order a coffee to-go was on the right side.

"You can sit wherever you'd like. Somebody will be out to take your order in a moment!" somebody called from behind the coffee machine on the bar. Sato looked at Mahiru, who shrugged and the two chose a table near a window.

Sato looked out the window, her eyes following the pedestrians outside, a slight smile appearing on her face.

Click. The camera shutter snapped, making a sound that started Sato out of her daze. Mahiru lowered the camera and grinned at her. "You looked so happy. I couldn't resist." Her smile grew a bit more bittersweet. "You don't smile as often as you used to, you know?"

A shadow passed over Sato's face. "Well, when I have to see *her* everyday, sometimes it's hard to let my guard down and be emotionally free." She brightened up again. "But let's not let somebody who isn't here ruin our day! This is our day out."

"Yeah." Mahiru smiled. She turned her attention to the small menu that was already on the table. "Do you know what you want?"

"Hm." Sato looked over the menu for a moment. "Probably just a latte and some of the macarons."

"Ooh! I've heard those are really good. I've heard that one of our upperclassmen was involved in the process of making them, and that they taste incredible," Mahiru said excitedly. "The Ultimate Confectioner herself."

"Then I guess we'll definitely have to order a few."

"We absolutely should. I think other than that, this Rose-Hip Tea looks really good."

"Sorry for the wait. I'll be your server today. How may I help- oh, it's you two," a new voice interrupted. A very familiar voice.

Mahiru looked up to see a sour-looking blonde girl. She had leaf green eyes and, despite how red her face currently was, Mahiru knew that the girl was almost always red in the cheeks. Mahiru opened her mouth to speak, but Sato beat her to it.

"Natsumi," she hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"Honestly, it's really none of your business." Natsumi's tone matched Sato's. "I work here."

"Oh? Did Daddy cut you off?" Sato smirked. "I never thought I would see the day."

Mahiru didn't think Natsumi could have gotten more red than she was but she did. "Shut up! Now what do you want?"

"That's no way to talk to *customers*, now is it?" Sato asked in mock innocence.

Natsumi stomped her feet and looked down. She looked up, a fake smile plastered on her face. "My name is Natsumi and I'll be taking care of you today. What can I get for you?"

"Let's see." Sato ran her finger down the menu. "I'll have a latte and a few of the macarons."

"Alright, and what flavors would you like?"

"Pistachio, raspberry, and lavender would be great."

Natsumi turned to Mahiru. "And you?"

"Oh! Just some Rose-Hip tea, and one chocolate, vanilla, and lemon macaron each, if that's ok."

"That is fine." Natsumi scribbled it all down. "It'll be out in just a moment." She walked away from the table and back to the bar.

"I don't see why you antagonize her so much," Mahiru said as soon as she was out of earshot.

Sato looked at her like she was crazy. "Me? Antagonize her? Do you remember how she acted when we were younger? How much *she* antagonized *us*?"

"Well, yeah, I do, but that doesn't mean we need to sink to her level," Mahiru protested.

"Yeah, I guess," Sato said, clearly unconvinced. "How about we talk about something else." She paused for a moment before looking excited. "Why don't you show me your pictures!"

"Sure!" Mahiru began to go through her camera roll, showing Sato pictures from everywhere they had been. They chatted a bit about each of the photos, talking about how skilled and sometimes sneaky Mahiru had managed to be; she'd even managed to get a picture of Sato as she had led Mahiru through the streets earlier.

"Here you are," Natsumi interrupted their conversation about ten minutes in. "Rose Hip Tea and your macarons." She put a plate of delicious looking macarons in front of her, as well as a steaming cup of pinkish-red tea. "And for you." She placed another plate with macarons in front of Sato, as well as a cup with a latte made in it. She made as though she was going to leave, but Sato cleared her throat.

"Actually, I don't think this is what I ordered."

Natsumi whirled around. "You ordered a latte, right?"

"No, I'm pretty sure I ordered a mocha latte. Could you remake this?" Sato asked, pushing the cup away from her.

Natsumi's eyes narrowed. "Is that so? Fine, I can remake it." She snatched it, nearly spilling the hot coffee all over the table, and headed back to the coffee machine.

"Why did you do that, Sato? You know she got the drink correct."

Sato turned to her with a look of exasperation. "C'mon, Mahiru, let me have this! It's just one day, one time that I can be slightly above her! See how she likes it for a change."

"Alright, fine," Mahiru said, trying to mask her disappointment. "These macarons are really good though."

"Yeah, they are," Sato agreed as the two ate some of their macarons. "We should get some more."

Mahiru nodded and swallowed. "I'll go see about getting some then!" She stood and walked around the other booths and tables, bringing her empty plate with her. She approached the pastry case but stopped short as she heard something.

"Ugh! You can't do anything right, can you! No wonder, you probably haven't done any ounce of work a day in your life. You didn't have to work to

become a yakuza princess!" Mahiru crept closer, listening to the shrill voice. It seemed to belong to a pink haired woman wearing a very impractical fur coat. "You'll never be anything but a stuck up brat! Get out of my sight, useless girl!"

Mahiru's eyes widened at the harshness of the woman. She crept backwards and quickly made her way back to the table.

Sato stopped typing on her phone and looked up. "Back so soon?"

"Yeah, I-" Mahiru stopped. She didn't really want to give any more ideas to Sato about Natsumi. "I decided it would be easier to just wait. You know, easier to, uh, combine the total price that way."

Sato seemed to buy her lie. "Yeah, that's probably true." The two fell silent, Sato continuing to type on the phone, and Mahiru trying to direct her attention to anywhere but the direction of the bar.

Finally, a woman came to their table. She was the same one that Mahiru had seen behind the bar. "I am super sorry about that! Here's your drink, fixed and on the house. If there's anything else you need, you can let me know directly."

"Ah!" Sato looked up and smiled at the woman. "Well, we did want to try some more macaron flavors."

"Ah! The macarons are my pride and joy. I'm so glad you both like them!" the woman chortled.

"Could we get one of each flavor then?" Sato asked.

"Sure. So that'll be nine more macarons. No problem, I'll have those for you soon."

Mahiru opened her mouth to ask what had happened to their current waitress, but the woman walked away too quickly.

"Don't worry, Mahiru," Sato said. "I'll cover this."

"Oh, you don't have to-"

"No, no, I insist. It's the least I can do for making me lunches all the time."

Mahiru smiled at her. "Thank you, Sato."

"Now that all of that has been taken care of, why don't we take a look at the rest of your pictures?"

They started going through more of their day, reliving the fun moments they had at the mall and walking through the beautiful areas of Towa City. In the back of her mind, however, Mahiru couldn't help but think about Natsumi, and what happened to her. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I think I need to go to the restroom," Mahiru said, standing.

"Alright, I'll just be waiting here!" Sato replied. Mahiru walked away and started looking for Natsumi, trying to find her in the restaurant. She wasn't behind the bar, and didn't seem to be doing any sort of cleaning or anything.

As she passed by the bathroom, she stopped. There was a weird noise, quietly leaking out from the door. Mahiru got closer, trying to figure out what it was. She realized as she stood next to the door that it was somebody crying. *'Is that Natsumi?'*

She poked the door open slightly and looked inside. Natsumi was sitting against the wall, curled up with her arms wrapped around her shins, cradling her legs against her chest. Her head was buried in the space between her arms, and she was crying.

Mahiru felt herself tense up, because it *was* Natsumi, but her protective side took over. “Natsumi! Are you ok?”

“G-go away, Mahiru!” Natsumi said in between sobs, not looking up.

Ignoring her, Mahiru knelt down next to her and put her hand on Natsumi’s back. “No, I don’t think so, Natsumi.” She started rubbing her back, trying to soothe her.

“N-no, I don’t… I don’t want anybody seeing me like this,” Natsumi responded.

Mahiru kept rubbing her back, saying nothing, letting Natsumi cry her heart out. After a few minutes, the sobs slowed, and Natsumi looked over at her, her eyes red and puffy. Mahiru smiled weakly back. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Natsumi sniffled before shoving her head back into her hands. Mahiru thought she was going to ask her to leave again, but instead she said, “It’s this job… a lot of the customers are terrible, but the owner is the worst. She’s really mean, and I’m… I’m just a screw-up.”

“I’m sure you’re not that big of a screw up, Natsumi.”

“No! I am! It feels like I can barely make half the drinks right! I feel like a total failure…”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, my drink tasted fine,” Mahiru offered.

“Still, I just… ugh, the only reason I’m here is because my dad wanted me to learn about responsibility.” She pounded her fist against the wall. “It’s not fair! I mean, I know Fuyuhiko is the one who’s anointed as the successor, but he never had to put up with this!”

“Sounds really unfair,” Mahiru said sympathetically.

“It really is… I don’t know why my dad has to be such a dick. Don’t get me wrong… I’m proud to be a yakuza… but he just makes me so miserable.”

Mahiru leaned against the wall and sat up against her. “I get it. My dad isn’t the best guy either.” She thought back to her dad, and how she had to grow up quickly in order to take care of the both of them.

Natsumi raised her head and looked at her. “R-really? Yours too?”

“Yeah,” Mahiru confirmed gently, giving a reassuring smile. “My mom wasn’t around very much as a kid, so I had to be the one to do all the housework myself. My dad was no help at all.”

“That’s terrible,” Natsumi murmured. They stayed quiet for a few moments before Natsumi spoke up. “Maybe you and I are more alike than I thought.”

“Maybe we are.” Mahiru smiled.

Their eyes met for a few seconds before Natsumi looked down. “Thank you, Mahiru. It means a lot to me that you would sit here with me, despite all I’ve done to you.”

“Aha, yeah…” Mahiru thought back to all those times Natsumi had insulted her or threatened to beat her up. “All that just disappeared from my mind when I saw you crying. I guess I’m just the nurturing type.”

“Whatever it is, it means a lot.” Suddenly, Natsumi jumped at her, wrapping her arms around Mahiru. “Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Mahiru was surprised for a moment but quickly hugged back. “You’re welcome, Natsumi.”

They stayed connected for a little while, Natsumi's face drying into Mahiru's sleeve. Finally, Natsumi gently moved away. "I'll be out in just a moment, if you want to go back to your table. I just want to wash my face first."

"Sure thing." Mahiru retreated from the bathroom and headed back to where Sato was sitting.

"Oh, hey! I was starting to wonder where you'd gotten off to." Sato looked concerned.

"Ah! I was just in the bathroom, no need to worry," Mahiru responded, sitting down.

"Ah well, the macarons came when you were gone. Sorry, I've already eaten some of the green tea ones."

"Oh, that's ok-" Mahiro trailed off as she saw Natsumi exit the bathroom and hurry over to their table.

Sato looked displeased. "Natsumi-"

Natsumi dropped to her knees and put her forehead to the ground. "Please forgive me, Koizumi and Sato. I've treated the two of you very, very wrong over the years, and I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. But... somebody showed me that sometimes people are a lot more than they seem, and I would like to start over with you two. I hope that I can at least earn your forgiveness."

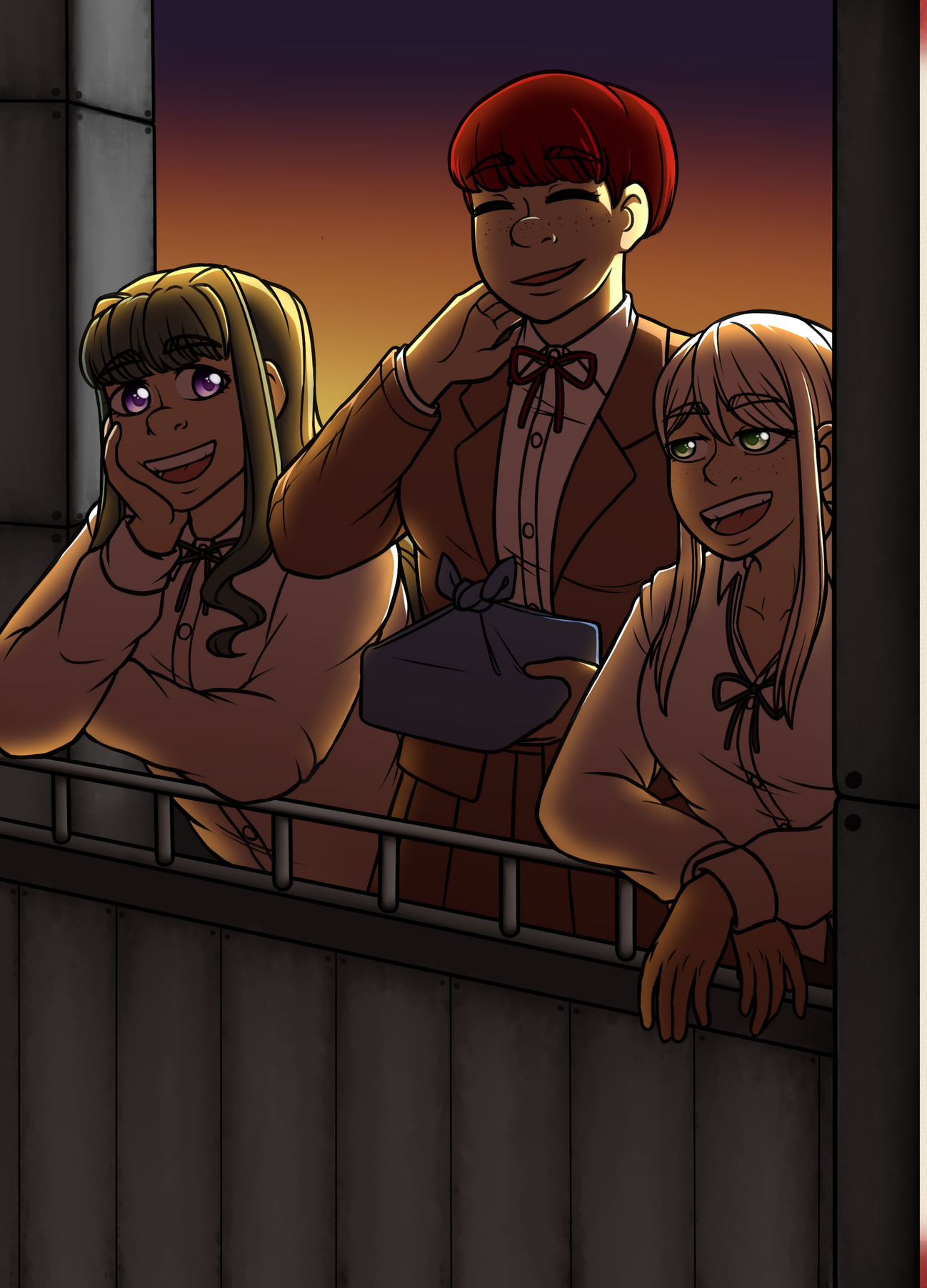
Mahiru looked at Sato; the other girl looked completely stunned. Mahiru looked down at Natsumi and smiled. "Of course, Kuzuryu. I forgive you. Let's start over."

Sato looked equally stunned at Mahiru's declaration. Mahiru could see the gears turning in Sato's head. "I- uh... I guess I forgive you too," she finally said reluctantly. "But don't think it'll be easy to earn my trust! I still remember everything, and it won't be as easy with me!"

"Thank you, Koizumi, Sato. I promise, I will do everything in my power to try to be a better person, especially to you two." She stood. There was a new look; a look of fierce determination. Must be a Kuzuryu trait, because that was the look her brother got when faced with a challenge. "I'll see you two at school tomorrow. Take care."

When she'd left, Sato looked at Mahiru. "Huh, that was strange, especially for her."

"Strange, yes, but hopefully this is a sign of change for the better. I really do think she was being serious, and I want to trust her." Mahiru stared off into space, already thinking of the new future where she, Sato, and Natsumi could be friends. What a nice future that it was going to be.



Reflection

by Kei, illustrated by Eli

content warning for body dysphoria

With the click of a button, Mahiru is connected to her surroundings.

Taking pictures has always been something that she enjoys, her love of photography passed down from her mother. It helps her make sense of a world that doesn't quite make sense.

She takes pictures of the scenery, of her friends, of the birds loitering around in the park. Each photo is special to her in different ways, serving as a way to document what life is like in her eyes.

Mahiru remembers the first camera she'd been given, a birthday present from her mother for her eighth birthday, a Kodak that she carried with her wherever she went.

"Life is worth cherishing," her mother told her. "Even the bad parts are worth cherishing, because there's always a rainbow on the other side."

And though Mahiru was too young to truly understand what her mother meant with those words, they've always stuck by her since. She can't remember what her first photo was of, but she knew then that photography was going to be more than just a hobby.

But even though she loves photography with a passion, there have been times where she feels lost and her photos don't spark a sense of creativity in her the

way they normally would. Except her creative block has lasted a little longer than she would've hoped it would.

She'd hoped to get over it by the time her class at Hope's Peak was set to go to Jabberwock Island for the semester, but it unfortunately hadn't worked out, and even after arriving at Jabberwock Island, her creative block still hadn't broken.

Mahiru is flipping through her camera roll for the millionth time that week when she hears the sound of a chair scraping against the concrete. She looks up to find Peko sitting in front of her, concerned expression over her face as she looks at Mahiru.

"Hey," Mahiru says softly, nodding at Peko before turning back to her camera. There's no emotion behind anything she has taken in the past few months, seemingly redundant as if they're just stock photos. The photos of the people around her, of her friends, of her classmates all feel devoid of emotion.

Even looking at her older photos doesn't seem to help either. It's hard to get into the same mindset she used to have when she's older now and doesn't view the world in the same way.

"You haven't touched your food," Peko says.

Mahiru just shrugs and puts her camera on the table. "Sorry," she mumbles sheepishly, and takes a bite out of her sandwich.

"Are you still having trouble with your photography?" Peko asks. "I've mentioned before that if you want to talk about it, I would be happy to help you resolve your predicament."

Mahiru hums. "Thank you, Peko, I do appreciate that you've been here to help me out."

It's hard to find the words to describe why she's having trouble with her creative block when she doesn't even know what's causing it in the first place. Is it because she transferred to Hope's Peak? She sure hopes not, Hope's Peak is the best thing that has ever happened to her.

But even though she's grateful for the escape that Hope's Peak provides, it's hard for her to remain happy when she's still struggling to feel as if she is part of the group. As friendly as she is with everyone in her class, she still feels awkward and out of place with everyone else. Her talent seems lackluster compared to everyone else. Mahiru's just a photographer, while there are important talents like the Ultimate Nurse, Ultimate Chef, and Ultimate Mechanic.

A realization dawns upon her then. Maybe it's that insecurity that's preventing her from breaking her creative block.

Peko just smiles slightly. "I'm always here to lend a hand," she answers, and the two get back to their lunch.

Hiyoko invites Mahiru to hang out with her and Ibuki later in the week. They're headed off to a shopping trip, because Hiyoko needs a new sash for her kimono and Ibuki's stockings ripped.

There's a strange feeling in Mahiru's gut as Ibuki and Hiyoko are enjoying themselves. She'd taken a look at some clothes she thought were cute, but as she's staring at herself in the mirror, she doesn't recognize who's staring back at her.

It's not an unusual feeling, usually only a feeling that she gets when everyone would make fun of her for how she looks and acts. But Hiyoko and Ibuki aren't making fun of her, they're doing the exact opposite—making sure she's part of the conversation, cheering her on when she shows off her outfits.

Mahiru is a girl. right? She knows she's a girl. Why does she feel so out of place being around girls? Is she just... bad at getting along with people no matter how friendly she is? Still, she keeps her composure.

Maybe hanging out with the boys would help. Kazuichi has been begging her to play video games with him and Hajime for the longest time now, so she texts Kazuichi and they make plans to hang out the following morning.

Today's one of those days where anxiety and nervousness crawls beneath Mahiru's skin and the idea of being known makes her want to curl up into a ball and cry.

It's a feeling that has persisted for a while, and maybe that's why Mahiru has been struggling with her creative block longer than she would've liked.

She cancels her hangout with Kazuichi, telling him that she's not feeling very well, and for the next three days, she keeps herself locked in her room.

The entire class heads over to the beach a few days later. Mahiru manages to get herself out of bed, hoping that today will be the day that she feels human enough to socialize.

It's an entirely different story when she puts on her swimsuit, and suddenly she starts crying.

She hates the way she looks—the way her hips stick out, the way her chest feels wrong, the way she looks so... so *feminine.*

Mahiru stays in her room for god knows how long until Peko comes by the dorm. Mahiru lets her in, and Peko's face falls when she notices Mahiru's puffy eyes and the tears streaming down her face.

"Are you doing all right?" Peko asks.

Mahiru lets out a choked sob, and Peko leans in to comfort her. They stay in silence for a while, until Mahiru regains her composure. She opens up to Peko about how she's been feeling lately.

"I understand how you must be feeling," Peko says. "Have you heard of the term 'transgender'?"

Mahiru shakes her head.

Peko continues on. "It's when you don't feel like the gender you were assigned as. You were born as a girl, but you don't want to be a girl."

And as Peko says that, Mahiru lets out a sigh of relief. She hadn't realized just how simple the solution to her problem was.

"I think"—Mahiru pauses to take a deep breath—"I think you're right," she says nervously. She plays around with the idea in her mind. It certainly explains much of how she's been feeling. And it's relieving to know that there's a word for that.

"I'm proud of you," Peko tells her. "Can I tell you something?"

Mahiru looks up at her curiously, nodding.

"I'm also transgender. I was unhappy with who I was before I realized that I was a girl," Peko explains. "And I know that it's not exactly the same as how you're feeling, but I'm here to support you should you choose to explore your new feelings."

Tears start to well up in Mahiru's eyes again, except this time it's not out of agony.

"Thank you."

"Of course. Now come on, let's go to the beach and hang out with our friends."

Mahiru takes Peko's hand, and they walk out together.

Along the way, Mahiru and Peko talk about what being transgender means for Mahiru. Though Mahiru doesn't have all of the answers just yet, talking to Peko about these feelings is as if a weight has been lifted off of Mahiru's chest. It's a little bit overwhelming, with the endless possibilities of terms and pronouns and other vocabulary underneath the transgender umbrella, but Peko's reassurance makes everything feel a little bit easier.

And in the coming days, Mahiru starts taking pictures again, their photos full of energy and life once again. They've cut their hair, changed their pronouns, and even changed up their wardrobe a bit. The euphoria of their self-discovery is unmatched, and Mahiru is more than grateful that they have friends that support them.

Why is MY desk suddenly the new meeting spot??
Suck IT up Reserve
You're in the Reserve Course too!
Pig Barf RUINED IT
Peko has such a cute smile!
The only photo of Izuru I could get :(

Sunset Photoshoots

by Rin, illustrated by bg

Mahiru sighed as she looked at the pictures on her camera. A slight frown formed on her lips, dissatisfied with the images. She let go of her camera, leaving it dangling around her neck. Mahiru looked around the empty hallway, wondering if anyone was still in the building. She wandered around a bit, but ultimately didn't find anyone. "I guess I'll head home then...." Mahiru muttered under her breath before she went back the way she came.

She planned on staying after school to take pictures, trying to take photos of stuff that she usually did. She tried taking still-life of things in different classes and of something other than smiling people. But, even after an hour of wandering around, she wasn't proud of anything that she ended up with.

Mahiru walked down the hallway, her mind filled with her thoughts and insecurities. A bright light came out of nowhere and blinded her as she walked. She let out a soft grunt as she held her hand up, blocking the sunlight that poured out from one of the windows from inside a classroom. She could see some bits and pieces of the sunset outside through the gaps between her fingers. She stared at it for a few seconds before she took a step inside the room. Mahiru walked up to the window, resting her hands on the window sill as she leaned up close. Behind Hopes Peak Academy, the sun was starting to set along the horizon. Clouds littered the blue sky, their bottoms painted with a light salmon pink and the sun clearing the horizon.

Mahiru stared out the window and lifted her camera. She messed with the settings and then steadied her finger over the button. It hovered there for a second, pulling her finger away when she heard a commotion outside the room. Mahiru lowered her camera again and focused her attention on the open door. She headed over to the door and peered out of the doorframe, a smile forming on her face. "Ah, Mikan!"

Her timid friend yelped before she stumbled, grasping onto the door frame to keep her from falling on the ground. "A-Ah... H...Hello Mahiru..."

Mahiru moved out of the way, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hey, sorry for startling you."

Mikan shook her head as she shook her hands. "N-No..! I...It's fine...."

Mahiru smiled at her before she gestured towards the classroom next to her. "Did you want to go in and talk for a bit?"

Mikan looked at her for a couple of seconds before she gave her shy nod. The two of them went back into the classroom, sitting down in the empty seats. Mahiru glanced towards the window before she looked at Mikan with a smile. "What are you doing here? I figured that I was going to be the only person here."

The timid girl let out a nervous hum, glancing to the side to avoid eye contact. "U-Um... N-Nagito injured himself so... I stayed behind to make sure that he was okay."

Mahiru nodded. "Is he okay?" She knew the answer to that question before it finished coming out of her mouth. The number of times he's had a near-death experience and laughing it off afterward honestly scared her.

Mikan gave her a slight enthusiastic nod. “Y…Yes, he’ll be fine….” She looked at her and pointed to her camera. “Were you taking pictures…?”

Mahiru picked up her camera and nodded. “Yea… I wanted to try to take some pictures, but… I didn’t like any of them….”

“I’m sure that they’re good… I-I… I think that you’re being a little hard on yourself….”

“Yea, maybe you’re right….” Mahiru sighed softly as she looked at the camera. A soft hum left through her closed lips as she flipped through the images on her camera.

Mikan watched her and let out a gentle sigh. “Maybe… you should force yourself to work so much…? I-I… I don’t want you to get burned-out and not be able to work….”

Mahiru nodded and looked at the last picture that she had taken before she called it a night. It was in one of the empty classrooms that she was in earlier. The windows were open, blowing the delicate sheer curtain and showing a portion of the colorful sky. Mahiru blinked before turning behind her, glancing out the window once more.

The sky had darkened since the last time she had looked, but the vivid colors were still there. Clouds had amassed at the bottom of the horizon and hid the sun. There were some pink and blue puffs of clouds scattered around the sky. A faint orange hue had engulfed Hope’s Peak Academy, and the windows reflected the sky.

Mahiru tightened her grip on her camera and looked at her friend next to her. “Hey, Mikan?”

Mikan jumped, being brought out of her self-detrimental thoughts. “Y-Yes…?”

Mahiru smiled at her softly, lifting her camera next to her face. “Can I take some pictures of you?”

Mikan froze and looked at her for a bit before her face heated up. She waved her hands around frantically as she backed away from her. “N…No..! Y-You can’t..! I…I’m not pretty enough, I… I’m sure I’ll just make a fool of myself a-and mess everything up.” She pulled her hands into loose fists, glancing over to the side as some small tears formed in her eyes. “I-I… I’m sure that you can find someone better than someone like me….”

Mahiru looked at her before she put her camera down in her lap. She leaned over and gently grabbed Mikan’s hand, giving it a small reassuring squeeze. Mikan looked at her hand before looking at her friend, a confused yet surprised look on her face. Her thin fingers gently wrapped around her hand, delicately squeezing her hand back.

Mahiru smiled at her and let out a small sigh, rubbing her bandaged hand softly. “I don’t think that you’ll ruin anything. If anything, you’re the one who's too hard on herself.”

Mikan paused, looking at her with a small sniffle. “Y-You… You think so…?”

Mahiru nodded, gently tightening her grip on the other's frail hand. "Yea, I do. And you know, between the two of us, I think you're the prettiest friend I have. You're overthinking everything and I'm sure that everything will go smoothly. I'll make of it, so... put your trust in me, okay...?"

Mikan sat there in silence, her purple eyes staring at her as if she was trying to see if she was telling the truth. Then, she let out a small sigh as she pressed her lips together and nodded softly. "O-Okay..."

Mahiru smiled and nodded, "you won't regret it, I promise." She got up, still holding Mikan's hand as she pointed at the window. "Let's go over there, I have an idea."

The two journeyed over to the window, letting go of each other's hands. Mahiru moved some desks out of the way. She lightly placed her hands on Mikan's shoulders and moved her to where she wanted her. Mahiru played with her hair slightly, making sure that it laid flat. She lightly tugged on her shirt collar and made her look a bit more presentable. She took a few steps back and lifted her camera when she was all done. She messed with the settings for a few seconds before she smiled at Mikan.

"Hey, Mikan," Mahiru smiled at her and held up a peace sign. "Can you do this for me? And don't forget to smile, okay?"

Mikan looked at her fingers before giving her a small nod, raising a slightly shaky peace sign. Her lips formed into an uncertain smile as she looked at the camera. Mahiru smiled at her friend as she started to take pictures, moving around her to get better shots. After every couple of minutes, she suggested a new pose for Mikan to spice things up per se. A lot of it was things that she saw from popular girls' social media, so nothing challenging for a clumsy person like Mikan.

Once their little photoshoot session was done, Mahiru got up and quickly flipped through the pictures that she took. A big smile formed on her face, a sense of pride bubbling up in her chest. The images that she took were phenomenal, probably one of her favorites that she had taken. Mikan was standing close to the left side of the window, her fingers gripping onto the hem of her light tan skirt. The vivid orange hue from the sunset cast onto Mikan, bringing out all of her best features. However, Mahiru couldn't help but just stare at her smile, watching it grow with each picture that she took.

Mahiru held her camera and went over to her, an excited bounce in her step. She stood close to Mikan, holding the camera to see the pictures taken of her. Mikan hesitantly looked at the pictures, looking surprised at the images. She looked like she'd just laid her eyes on the love of her life for the first time - which Mahiru couldn't blame her. This was probably the first time she laid eyes on a flattering picture of herself. And just knowing that made her stomach bubble with joy. Mahiru smiled, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "So, what do you think?"

Mikan's eyes never left the images on her camera, seeming like she was on a trace. She eventually tore her eyes away, looking at her with her eyes glossy with tears. She let out an embarrassed laugh before she smiled at her. "Y-You... You take... r-really good pictures...."

Mahiru let out a small laugh, putting her hands behind her back. "You're the reason why they look so good, silly! But thank you for letting me take pictures of you, I had a good time."

Mikan shook her head, shyly putting some hair behind her ear. "N-No... I-I should be thanking you...."

Mahiru smiled before she let out a small hum. "Say, would you let me take more pictures of you in the future?"

Mikan looked at her for a few seconds before giving her a gentle nod. "Y-Yea..."

Mahiru's eyes shone, her smile getting bigger once she heard her. "Really? Well, I'm looking forwards to the next time I get to take pictures of you." She started to move towards the door. "I'm going to head out now, but, I'll see you tomorrow."

Mikan nodded and held her hand up, shaking it softly as she waved back. Mahiru smiled at her before turning around and walking out of the room. Before she could walk down the hall, she heard Mikan shout her name.

Mahiru turned around, looking into the classroom to see why her name was called out. Mikan was standing where she was before, her face red and tightly gripping the hem of her skirt. She looked at her, her light purple eyes seeming panicked as she tried to find the right words to say. Her grip on her skirt tightened as she looked down at the ground, tensing up a bit. "M-Ma...Mahiru...! Th...Thank you...for...for being my friend...!" Her voice shook, as if she was scared to hear what her answer would be.

Mahiru looked at her for a few seconds before a big smile. She walked back into the room, gently taking hold of Mikan's shaking hands. The nurse looked up at her, her eyes glistening as tears started to form once again. Mahiru gently squeezed her hands as she looked at her. "There's no need to thank me, after all... I'm glad to have such a good friend like you."

Mikan nodded, taking her hand away from Mahiru's. She sniffled as she used her bandaged wrist to wipe away her tears before they had a chance to fall. Mahiru smiled softly before she rubbed her shoulder softly. "I'm going to go home now."

Mikan gave her a nodded and gave her a shy smile. "A-Alright, I'll... I'll see you tomorrow...."

Mahiru nodded and waved as she started to leave the room for the last time. As she walked out of Hope's Peak and headed towards her dorm, she held her camera close to her chest. As she looked at the mostly navy blue sky, a big smile formed on her lips. A heavy sigh escaped through her lips as she looked at the night sky. Maybe Mikan was right, and she shouldn't be so hard on herself as much.

HOW TO:
TAKE OVER THE WORLD

SAY CHEESE!

CAM

©Punkburd Arts

WAIT—

Please be careful, it's NOT a toy!!

Yonaga-san, are you listening?

Say "Chiizu, Mahiru!!

Huh... I guess you have an eye for... capturing the moment.

It's very easy to capture Mahiru's natural beauty!

Onii God knows!

But, seriously... where'd you put my camera?

Snellyfish

Fukawa said there will be ghosts in the picture if you're in it...

She may be correct.

Let's not joke about that...

What the f*ck?!

Kehehe...

Light in the Dark

by Toffee Pop, illustrated by Wolveseur

A plastic disco ball sat on a mahogany dining table. It spun around the kitchen and living room creating a kaleidoscope of mirrored lights. Two silhouettes were sitting on a beer stained couch. Their conversation gradually died down throughout the evening as their hands wandered. A trio of drunks lay in the kitchen snacking on burnt chicken nuggets that they took out of the oven only moments ago. Others dance, chat or at various stages of intoxication. All the while, Mahiru Koizumi arrived only moments ago. Her presentation at the local gallery took longer than expected. It was now nearing one in the morning when she finally entered Sonia's place.

"Koizumi!" The princess noticed the front door open and ran down the hall to embrace the photographer in a big hug. "I am so happy you could make it!"

"Of course! Sorry I'm late, congrats on getting your visa!"

Sonia waved her hand dismissively. "It is nothing. I am far more curious about how your exhibit went!"

"Oh..." Mahiru shifted the lining of her dress beneath her thumbs, "It went great!"

"Amazing!" Sonia took Mahiru's hands and shook them up and down. "I knew you could do it!"

"T-Thanks..." Mahiru blushed. They then heard a booming voice from across the house, "Sonia! I challenge you! I will drink you under this table!"

“Oh my! I nearly forgot, Nekomaru is expecting me! I better go.”

“Wait... Did I hear that right? You’re challenging Nekomaru to a... drinking competition?”

“Of course!” The princess grabbed her bicep and smirked. “We are getting hella’ lit tonight!”

Mahiru awkwardly chuckled, “I see...”

“We will meet later, yes? Please enjoy yourself!” The princess bowed and left Mahiru to wander about the party. She greeted her friends as she went. Each one of them was happy to see her, and some even asked how her display went. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and Mahiru didn’t want to ruin their good time. She forced a toothy smile and mingled as best she could.

...

Minutes turned to hours and Mahiru wondered if her obligation to appear at the party had been fulfilled.

‘Besides...’ Mahiru thought to herself, ‘Everyone is so drunk they probably won’t even remember I was here.’

She ran a finger around the brim of her glass of orange juice as she wondered what to do. Across the room of rainbow lights, she spotted a boy with messy looking hair she didn’t recognise. He was on the deck overlooking Tokyo. The fresh air sounded good, so she decided to join him.

“Ah, hi there.” Mahiru said as she slid open the door. The boy looked surprised but quickly composed himself and replied, “Hey, you getting away too?”

“Yeah...” Mahiru leaned against the railing beside him. Little orange and white spots of light dotted the dark landscape below. She ran her fingers through her long red hair, allowing the wind to blow through it.

“I think I saw you earlier, right?” Mahiru had her eyes closed as she focused on the cool night air caressing her skin. “You came with Chiaki?”

“That’s right.” The boy was pleased to be recognised. “She clocked out pretty early, though.” Hajime pointed to a curled up ball of blankets inside the house. It was sitting on a couch and had a flurry of pink hair sticking out of the top.

“Yup that’s her.” Mahiru smiled, and they both chuckled at the sight.

A moment of silence followed, which was quickly squashed by Hajime sticking out his right hand. “I’m Hajime Hinata. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Mahiru Koizumi.” She shook his hand and noted his firm, confident grip.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Koizumi... is something wrong?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“Sorry.” Hajime’s cheeks went red as he scratched the back of his neck. “You just seem... distant.”

Mahiru's lips curled into a sad smile. She covered her face with her palm and sighed. "I don't know if it says more about you, or my friends, that you're the first one to notice." She puffed out her cheeks and blew a mouthful of air into the night. "It's kind of difficult to explain... are you sure you're willing to hear it?"

Hajime's expression twisted in thought. He looked back inside and noticed the pile of blankets had toppled over. Chiaki's head now emerged from the top and rested against one of the couch's cushions.

"Yeah, I think I have some time." Hajime dryly groaned before staring at Mahiru expectantly.

"Well, in case you didn't know. I'm a photographer." She still felt embarrassed calling herself that. Although she had every qualification and right to title herself as such, she still felt it arrogant.

"It used to be that I had to struggle for even an ounce of recognition. Paying my way to get even a single one of my photos in the corner of a gallery. Crowds of people would pass me by without a second thought. But I kept taking pictures. I kept coming back. Eventually, I got a few glances, then a few compliments. Crowds gathered. And now I host my own galleries." Mahiru lost herself in the past as she talked into the wind. Hajime could have left and she wouldn't have noticed. "Actually, one time, a frigid old geezer entered a gallery I was hosting. He had this hard forward facing brow and these floppy creases which made it look like he was always frowning."

Mahiru burst into laughter as Hajime nodded.

"Anyway, he makes his way around the gallery and eventually I notice him stop right in front of a photo. He stands there for like 20 minutes just staring at it. I don't even remember what it was, but as I make my way over to him, I notice a tear run down his cheek. So I ask him what he thinks, and he doesn't answer me for a long time. Slowly he turns to face me and then slaps me right across the face!"

"What, he assaulted you!?"

"I know right! He swears in some foreign language and is escorted out." Mahiru took the railing of the balcony in her hands and leaned all the way back with a massive smile on her face. "It was the best compliment I ever got! I made someone feel an emotion that strongly. What could be better than that?"

Hajime chuckled, "You're weird." Koizumi only grinned harder in response.

"Of course..." The photographer returned to standing on two feet. "That was a long time ago."

Mahiru slipped an expensive-looking smartphone out of her pocket and after tapping it a few times, she showed Hajime a series of images; blooming flowers, a sunset, crashing waves, a windswept field and more.

"These are great." Hajime nods along as she swipes through the pictures.

"Thanks, it was my first time doing nature photography and although a lot of these are cliche - I'm happy with the result."

"But why are you showing me these?"

“Well... my work kept getting more and more attention. My photos started to sell. Some displays became auctions. And then I was invited to Hope’s Peak and given the title of ‘Ultimate Photographer’ and something changed.”

Mahiru turned around and leaned her back against the railing as she crossed her arms. The moon peeked out from behind low-hanging clouds before hiding behind tomorrow’s rain.

“When I contact a gallery, the moment I mention my name, I’m accepted. All my work seems to be universally loved. Every piece sold and resold then sold again. I felt like I was producing the best work I’d ever done. So I switched things up and dip my toes into nature photography.” Mahiru’s brow creased into her olive eyes. “Can you guess how it went?”

Hajime hesitated before answering, “Horribly?”

The photographer smiled slightly. “It went great. It was one of the largest turnouts to one of my galleries yet. But it shouldn’t have been. It was far from my best work, yet I received nothing but praise.”

“I mean... isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, it’s not! My work is far from flawless, and as someone new to nature photography, I knew going in my work had issues. And yet I was never called up on them.” Mahiru took a deep breath and finally said the quiet part out loud. A fear that had been consuming her over the last few months. “My name outweighs my merits.”

“Are you sure?”

“I wasn’t sure... but it kept weighing on me. Do people actually like my photos or do they only care because I’m the *‘Ultimate Photographer’*”? Koizumi watched the city lights flicker in the dark. “That was until earlier tonight.”

Mahiru opened her phone once again and handed it to Hajime. He began scrolling through an album of out-of-focus pictures taken in a dim room. A dirty stainless steel frying pan, grey sheets laid curled on a messy bed, a fluorescent bulb hanging from string, a half-empty fish tank and a desk fan.

“No composition, no work, no effort. I grabbed my cell phone, turned off the lights and just took a bunch of random photos in my house.

Hajime met Mahiru’s downtrodden eyes with his and asked softly, “And?”

“A brave new direction in still life photography. Viewings start at ¥10,000 yen.” Mahiru buried her head into her forearms. “I’m a product to be sold. A vapid commodity for rich people to insert meaning into where there is none.”

An icy wind blew over the house where the pair stood. It was a quiet night. The music had stopped, and a dog barked from somewhere in the valley below. They could hear quiet chatter coming from a room down the hall and snoring from the one after that.

“I’m sorry to unload like this.”

“I-It’s okay.”

“Coming to this party was a mistake.”

Sonia's shouts suddenly from the other room, "WHO IS NEXT!? I WILL DRINK YOU ALL UNDERNEATH THIS TABLE!"

Mahiru snorted, "At least they're having fun."

"What ever happened to the old man?"

"Oh! I don't know." Mahiru shrugged. "The police weren't involved, so I think he's probably off somewhere, being old and grumpy."

"That old man... if he saw your work now, how do you think he would feel about it?"

Mahiru's stomach churned.

"Do you think he would care what title you have?"

The photographer stopped leaning against the railing and stared at Hajime.

"Truth be told, I already know who you are." Hajime continued. "I'm not special like you or anyone else here. I'm from the reserve course. I just happened to meet Nanami, and she invited me here tonight. I also know who your mother was... a war photographer."

Mahiru looked down at the cracks of darkness in between the wooden planks of the deck.

"I believe you're thinking about this all wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

"When your mother took a photo, do you think she cared about people's reaction to its artistic merit? She had a reason, a message to communicate, an intent."

Mahiru reflexively shook her head.

"She didn't need some snobby rich dude playing critic to approve of her work. Only feel something. Just like that old guy did." Hajime tensed his entire face into a cringe. "Sorry! Not to say I know your mother better than you or anything, all I'm saying is... Koizumi, you take amazing photos. You don't need to prove that anymore. But now that you can, and now that you have a platform, what are you going to do with it?"

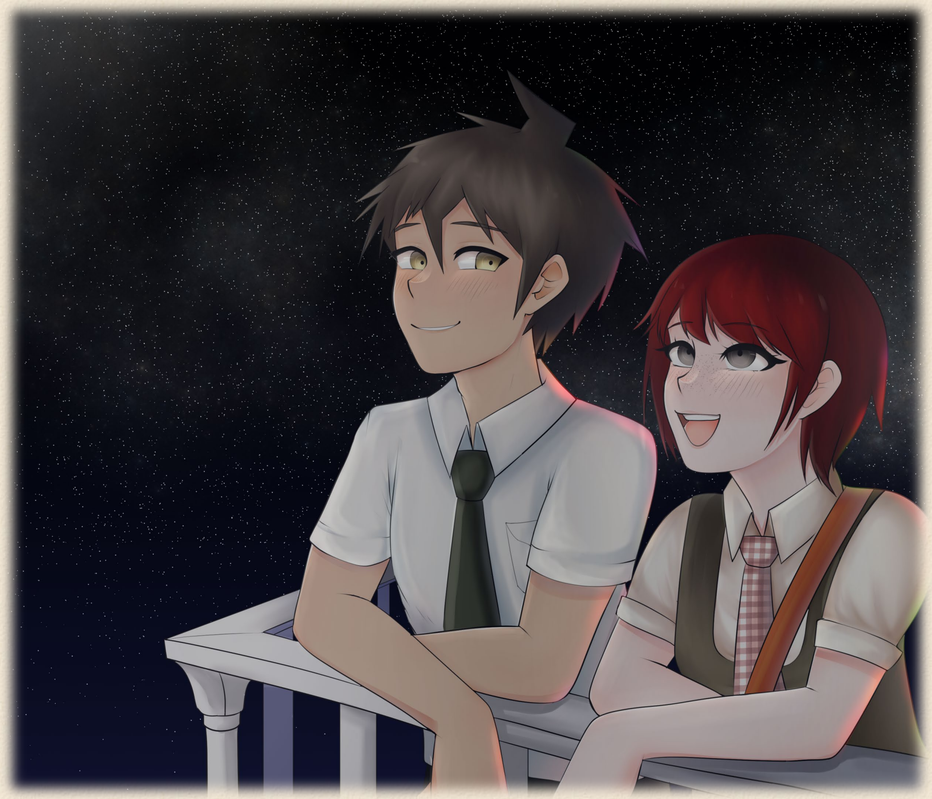
"What am I... going to do?" Her mind raced, a dead end road full of meaningless drivel suddenly became an intersection of endless possibilities.

"You're right." Mahiru nodded with a hard-fought smile, "I... I needed to hear that. I was so scared about being perceived as a valid photographer that I forgot about the reason I became one in the first place."

"And what's that?"

The moon once again peeked out from behind the clouds and sparkled in the photographer's eyes, "I want to be just like mum!" Mahiru then paced around the veranda while muttering to herself, "There is so much to do! Should I tackle a single issue or multiple? Maybe a blight on a demographic, or should it be something more global? Or the opposite? Maybe an issue native to Japan?"

Hajime laughed from the bottom of his belly. “Looks like you’re feeling better!”



“I am!” Mahiru grinned so wide it creased her eyes. “Thanks, Hinata. Thank you for being a creepy stalker who knows way too much about my family!”

“What!?”

“Oh, come on!” She poked him in the ribs with her elbow. “Should we go inside? I feel like drinking now! I bet I could even beat Sonia!”

“Oh!” Hajime’s smile vanished. He stood rigid against the railing and looked away. “That’s okay. You go have fun. I might stay out here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t... I don’t really fit in with the rest of you.”

Mahiru rolled her eyes, walked right up to him and grabbed his wrist. “Yes, you do! But you won’t if the only thing you ever do is stay out here and comfort brooding photographers.” She pulled him toward the door and smiled. “Come on, let’s go have fun!”

Hajime relented with a sigh and a smile, “Alright. Let’s go!”

Credits

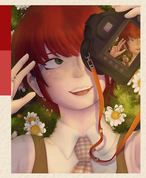
TUESDAY
tuesdaysanyways

IRISOWARI
"Snapshot"

irisowari

MAE
vhsghostricks

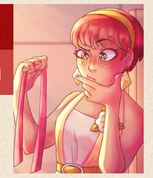
KEITH
FaeOfStars

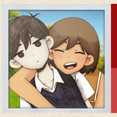


KO
nyagitokomeowda meshimeow

SILVVER
greenpaladin3 silvverdraws

VIANA
vianadraws viana_draws



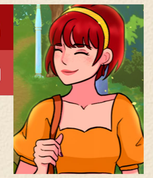


SUNNY
"Third Time's The Charm!"

K1IBOUMA
k1ibOuma

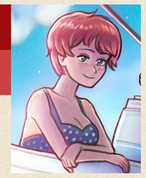
MAE
vhsghostricks

FLORA
florafication flora.fication



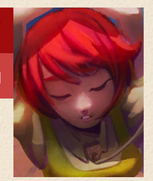
KITTY
Kittydoesstuff1 kitty-does-stuff

THERAREHUNTERH
rarewishes therarehunterhunter



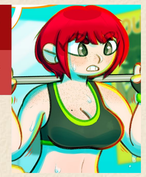
FENRIR
SteampunkWolves

KY
cowsnack



WINTERMELYNN
wintermelynn justlynnstore

8-BIT MONKEY
8bitmonkeyart



SOUL
"ersatz"

soulioli soulimagines

RAE
zipsunz

REN SOLUS
ren_solus

FAX
fax_lore

MINT
minttellect

LANCE
"A Gilded Past, A Brighter Future"

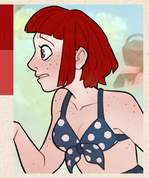
Ecchi_Skecchi ecchi_skecchii

ELI
norangery

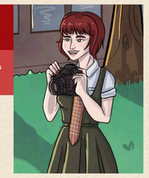
KEI
"Reflection"

kamunamis

SNELLYFISH
Snellymain snellyfish



BLUE
04vblues



JAIRA
jairaatsundown

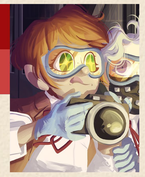
RINZU
Rnezu_ rnezu

PICHU
justrainysunshines jrainysunshines

TOFFEE POP
"Lights in the Dark"

Toffee_Pops_Are_Great toffee-pops-are-great

KYLIE M ESTES
kingcrayony



RIN
"Sunset Photoshoots"

Rin_chan32 Rinnyringring

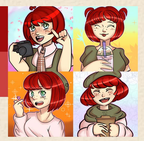
WOLVESEUR
wolveseur

BG
Origamidragon

TILLY
tillyteknikolor tillytechnicolor

FENNEL
turnipcats turniparc

GAL
heyhoheroarts



KIRA
Syberian_Inc

PM
2p42m

JASMINE
youtait yOutait

K1IBOUMA
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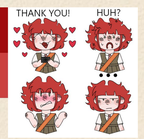
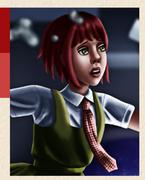


PUNKBURD ARTS
punkburdarts



MANTIS
mabtis

WILDE J
wilde_boy2000 wilde_j_n

ELI

norangery

FENNEL

turnipcats turniparc

KO

nyagitokomeowda meshimeow

WINTERMELYNN

wintermelynn justlynnstore

Mods

Bee

co-head, organisation, writing

hivezines

Eli

co-head, art, formatting

norangery

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